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SUBJECT: BIOLOGY FAVORS BOUTEFLIKA ON ELECTION EVE

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[1](#)B. 08 ALGIERS 1307

Classified By: DCM Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S) SUMMARY: General Larbi Belkheir, known for decades as the kingmaker within Algeria's military establishment, is in declining health and has all but formally faded from the political scene. His impending death will accelerate the decline of the army leaders (the "Janvieristes") who led the 1992 coup d'etat, and gives President Bouteflika an even freer hand in the run-up to the April 9 presidential election. A rival since Bouteflika's rise to power in 1999, Belkheir was sent as Algerian ambassador to Morocco in 2005. The move came at a time when Bouteflika himself was particularly vulnerable due to illness, and was widely seen as a respectful way for Bouteflika to marginalize Belkheir after famously declaring he refused to be "three-fourths of a president" who could be appointed or removed at the will of the army leadership (ref A). A replacement for Belkheir in Rabat has reportedly already been chosen by the president, and a formal announcement of the change is expected sometime after the elections. The effective passing of Belkheir marks the latest step in the evolution of an Algerian political reality that one opposition leader has branded a "biological system" in which change is measured by who among the 1960s-era leadership dies first. END SUMMARY.

TWILIGHT OF THE CARDINAL

[1](#)2. (S) The March 16 edition of the Arabic-language daily El Khabar featured the front-page headline that General Larbi Belkheir was leaving the "Pouvoir," Algeria's shadowy traditional leadership circle. Moroccan embassy contacts and Belkheir's daughter have both confirmed to us recently that Belkheir has been in poor health and in the military hospital in Algiers for over a month. Still, public pronouncements of shifts within the Pouvoir are unusual (ref B), save for prominent obituaries such as the front-page death of General Smain Lamari, a Belkheir ally, in August 2007. (Lamari was long the number two in Algeria's Departement du Renseignement et de la Securite, or DRS, the state military intelligence service, and had served as its counter-espionage chief.) Political consultant Hamid Bakli told us recently that Belkheir bore the popular nickname "the Cardinal of Frenda" (Belkheir's hometown), a reference to Cardinal Armand de Richelieu, since he shared Richelieu's ability to dictate policy and appointments from behind the scenes. Belkheir is believed to have broken countless ambassadorial, ministerial and other appointments over the past quarter century, and was one of the strongest of the Janvieriste generals whose grip Bouteflika has methodically sought to break (ref A).

CLEARING THE WAY FOR BOUTEFLIKA

[1](#)3. (S) At a time when the entire Algerian government is essentially in a lame-duck period before the April 9

presidential election, Belkheir's failing health has prompted some human resource planning at the Presidency. Both the press and the rumor mill suggest that Belkheir will be replaced as ambassador to Rabat by presidential Chief of Staff Moulay Guendil, in whom Bouteflika has reportedly lost trust. (El Khabar speculated that the change will come shortly after Bouteflika's reelection, but the Moroccan embassy here has told us privately they expect Bouteflika to wait for Belkheir to die before formally announcing his replacement.) A Presidency contact told us that Bouteflika and Guendil have not been speaking regularly "for months," as the president has preferred to seek the counsel of his brother, Said. Bakli said that Morocco "was the perfect place for Bouteflika to exile his rivals" with dignity. Guendil would not be the first chief of staff sent there: Belkheir was also Bouteflika's chief of staff until being appointed to Rabat in August 2005. Our source at the Presidency also confirmed the El Khabar report that Guendil will be replaced at the presidency by General Nadjib, formerly in charge of presidential security and believed to be a DRS figure close to Said Bouteflika.

¶4. (S) The Moroccan DCM told us March 23 that the Moroccan ambassador in Algiers finally succeeded in calling on Belkheir on March 18 after several weeks of effort. Belkheir received him in a room in the military hospital's hotel wing, though the Moroccans believe he had been moved there from a hospital bed to meet with them. Belkheir was visibly thinner, could not get up from his chair, and was hooked to an oxygen tank. Though Belkheir spoke of his work in Morocco as if he intended to return to it, he also admitted that he had recently informed President Bouteflika that he was too

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"tired" at the moment to go back to Rabat. While Belkheir was lucid, the Moroccans had the impression that his wife was carefully monitoring what he said, as if she was fearful he might become incoherent. Belkheir spoke fondly of Morocco, prompting the Moroccan DCM to remark to us, "He would have been a good ambassador if he had been sent there to work, instead of as an exile."

COMMENT

¶5. (S) Because Algeria continues to be dominated by the same generation that liberated the country from the French in 1962, opposition leader Said Sadi has labeled Algeria's political system a "biological" one where stability depends on which Pouvoir members live the longest. The passing of Belkheir boosts Bouteflika's efforts to eliminate centers of power within the Pouvoir that were historically able to threaten his position (ref A). Consultant Chafik Mesbah, a former DRS officer, acknowledged to us recently that Belkheir's departure can only strengthen Bouteflika's hand because it further clears the way for his electoral machine to propel him to a reelection uncontested within the ranks of the political-military establishment. Meanwhile, the pattern of appointing presidential chiefs of staff as ambassador to Morocco also suggests a political mentality that sees Rabat not as an opportunity for skilled, professional diplomats, but rather as a place to banish victims of internal power struggles.

PEARCE